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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided of eight training sessions for teachers of pre-school children who are speakers of English as a second language (ESL). Developed by the Vancouver Preschool ESL Committee and a community college, the course had the following goals: (1) to explore teachers' cultural assumptions and understand how they affect relationships with people of other cultures; (2) to broaden teachers' understanding of the ways in which culture shapes the child's development; (3) to develop attitudes, knowledge, and skills to enable preschool staff to work more effectively with ESL families; (4)to increase awareness of first language acquisition processes and consider the implications of learning a second language at the preschool level; (5) to develop a program that reflects and enhances the multicultural nature of the preschool group; (6) to develop a program that enhances integration with the host culture; (7) to develop and extend language learning experiences in the preschool setting; and (8) to broaden the participants' perspective of school as an integral part of the education process and acquaint them with current trends and directions in the early childhood education and ESL fields. (MSE)

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Working with ESL Preschoolers: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child

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BACKGROUND

In September 1980, a symposium entitled *Preschool and the ESL Child* brought together over 200 early childhood educators, government representatives and members of our province's ethnic communities, all of whom share a commitment to better meeting the needs of non-English speaking preschoolers. Symposium participants identified five central issues which were critical to serving these children, their families and their teachers effectively. These issues were:

Teacher Training
Resource Development
Research and Data
Administration
Public Education.

In order to implement the specific recommendation pertaining to each of these issues, the PRESL (Preschool English as a Second Language) Committee was formed. Over the past year and a half, PRESL has directed its energies and activities towards this implementation process. The recommendations from the symposium have served as our guide.

The purpose of this article is to share with you our progress to date regarding the issue of teacher training.

RATIONALE

Preschool and day care staff are acutely aware of the fact that their teacher preparation programs do not address in depth either the theoretical or practical implications of working with ESL children. While ECE (Early Childhood Education) graduates demonstrate competency in knowing the individual child, program planning and interacting with families, the length and design of their course of studies does not permit a comprehensive examination of the specific attitudes, knowledge and skills requisite to meeting the needs of ESL preschoolers. Given the increasing enrolment of immigrant and Canadian born non-English speaking children in early childhood facilities, preschool personnel recognize the urgency of addressing these issues both for their own personal and professional development as well as for the children in their care. The specific symposium recommendations which give expression to this need read as follows:

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A. We recommend to the Post Secondary Division, Program Services, Ministry of Education that Early Childhood Education competency based programs be augmented to include the following:
   a) information regarding second language learning
   b) information regarding cultural heritage and traditions
   c) information regarding diverse child rearing practices among cultural and ethnic groups
   d) sensitization to the issues of adjustment and transition as faced by immigrant families
   e) skills and knowledge to implement multicultural programming in early childhood education settings
   f) developing appropriate approaches to parent education programs for parents of ESL preschoolers.

B. We recommend that all institutions providing Early Childhood Education Programs and relevant professional organizations undertake to plan and implement ongoing professional development (eg. seminars, workshops) to increase the effectiveness of Early Childhood personnel in providing quality programs for preschool ESL children.

STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In direct response to this clearly articulated need for specific teacher training, PRESL, in co-operation with the ECE Continuing Education Department of Vancouver Community College, Langara Campus, sponsored a course entitled *Working with ESL Preschoolers: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child.* Careful consideration was given to the length and design of this course. The course Planning Committee felt strongly that sufficient instructional hours be allocated for a comprehensive examination of the many factors involved in working effectively with ESL Preschoolers. Given that all research points to the early years as the most critical period for language development, the building of healthy self-concepts and the fostering of positive attitudes towards learning, it was agreed that a full semester of study (45-50 hours) was required to address adequately the multifaceted aspects of providing quality programming for these children.

A format of one full Saturday per month from September through April (eight months) was agreed upon as a meeting time which would fulfill 48 hours of instruction and allow for an indepth exploration of a particular theme.

What follows is a brief overview of the eight meeting dates with reference to the theme, goal and outline of each session.

THEME I: INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY - A LOOK AT OURSELVES

Goal: To explore our own cultural assumptions and to understand how these affect our relationships with people of other cultures.

Outline: In order to better understand the factors that affect our communication patterns, it is helpful to be aware of how our cultural backgrounds influence these patterns.

Throughout this session, participants were led through various experiential exercises which highlighted the extent to which eye contact, spatial distance, voice tone and ways of structuring a conversation are all culturally controlled.

Cultural assumptions which were examined could potentially create cross-cultural conflict based on differing value systems. Through film, video tape and discussion, five stumbling blocks to intercultural communication were identified. These were language, non-verbal styles of communication, preconceptions and stereotypes, our tendency to evaluate, and the high level of anxiety which underlies the uncertainty of cross-cultural interaction.

At the end of the session, participants had gained some sensitivity to their own cultural conditioning and had begun to gain awareness of how culture can and does affect our expectations and behaviour.

THEME II: CHILD REARING PRACTICES - A LOOK AT OTHER CULTURES

Goal: To broaden our understanding of the ways in which culture shapes the development of the child.

Outline: In order to understand how a particular cultural milieu shapes the development of each child, it is helpful to become familiar with the similarities and differences in a variety of child rearing approaches.

During this session, participants were introduced to a panel of four women from different ethnic backgrounds, each of whom shared what they perceived as commonalities of child rearing practices in their own cultures. Participants were introduced to culture-specific information regarding value systems, lifestyles, roles and responsibilities of family members and attitudes towards such issues as language development, play, self-help skills and discipline.

The latter part of this session was given to viewing films from the National Film Board series entitled *Children of the World*, as well as a film entitled *Emigrante*.

THEME III: WORKING WITH FAMILIES

Goal: To develop attitudes, knowledge and skills which will enable preschool staff to work more effectively with ESL families.

Outline: In order to appreciate and respond sensitively to the needs of ESL families, it is important to gain some insight into their situation and information regarding community resources which may assist ECE personnel and these families.

The morning began with a discussion of some of the common adjustment problems faced by many immigrant families as they begin a new life in a strange country. Participants gained awareness of such issues as the uprooting trauma, culture shock, loss of social support systems, change of economic and social status, parenting dilemmas and adjustment to the educational system, and considered the implications of these adjustment issues as they affected the functioning of the family and the young child.

The film *Rosanna: Portrait of an Immigrant Woman* (NFB) was shown. This film served to demonstrate in a personal and concrete way the adjustment problems faced by new Canadians and to increase our awareness of their impact.

The issue of orienting ESL families to the ECE setting was discussed in some detail and practical suggestions and strategies for this process were shared. Working in small groups, participants were given an opportunity to role-play a number of hypothetical parent-teacher interchanges where sensitivity and empathy were critical to a constructive resolution.

Participants were also informed about various community agencies concerned with immigrant settlement and the provision of support and counselling services to new Canadian families.

THEME IV: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Goal: To increase our awareness of the developmental stages of first language acquisition and to consider the implications of learning a second language at the preschool level.

Outline: In order to offer appropriate language stimulation for second language learning and to comprehend the meaning of language to a young child, it is important to understand the cognitive process of language acquisition.

During this session, participants were introduced to the universal features of language development and to the precursors of language content, form and use. Research related to the learning of a second language in the early years was discussed. Participants were encouraged to consider very carefully the purposes or objectives for introducing English to preschoolers and to assess their verbal interactions with children in light of these objectives. Learning and using language for adjustment to routines, self-help, joining in and understanding were suggested as the key purposes for the early introduction of English. Useful strategies for working towards these objectives were identified as concreteness, reinforcing body language, encouragement, repetition and expansion.

THEME V: PROGRAM PLANNING

Goal: To develop a program which reflects and enhances the multicultural nature of the preschool group.

Outline: In order to plan and implement this kind of program, it is necessary to appreciate both the theoretical and practical implication of multicultural education.

Participants were provided with working definitions of culture, multiculturalism, tokenism and multicultural program planning. An emphasis was placed on the attitudinal component of multicultural education wherein cultural diversity is used as a valuable resource and similarities and differences are used to positive ends. Central to this attitude is a belief that all children can benefit emotionally, socially and intellectually from knowing their own heritage and the heritage of others.

Criteria for evaluating multicultural curricula were suggested and students were engaged in the exercise of translating this attitude and knowledge into concrete programming. Working in small groups, participants considered each of the learning or interest centres common to ECE settings and ways in which the general environment, equipment, materials and activities could be enriched and augmented to reflect the involvement of children from a variety of cultures.

During the latter part of this session, participants shared some of the themes, books, songs, and other curricular activities which they had used to promote multicultural learning in their own preschool settings. They were also introduced to a variety of print and non-print resources which could be used.

At the end of this session, participants had gained a better understanding of multiculturalism as it translates into relevant programming for preschoolers.

THEME VI: PROGRAM PLANNING

Goal: To develop a program which enhances integration with the host culture.

Outline: In order to assist the ESL preschoolers in making a successful transition into the host culture, it is important to assess the strategies they employ to increase the child's comfort level and to ensure that the program they offer meets the needs of the whole child.

Suggestions were offered in terms of preplanning, gradual entry, and responding to separation anxiety. Simple program activities which were familiar, non-threatening, non-directive, and inviting of participation were shared. During this very practical morning session, participants were reminded that the success of the preschool program rests solely on creating a secure, relaxed atmosphere where children feel good about the teacher, the centre and each other. Building this trusting environment depends upon the ability of the teacher to set realistic expectations, to contribute positively to each child's self-concept and to develop a program which begins where the child is.

In the afternoon, discussion focussed on the ethical considerations of working with ESL children. Participants were encouraged to examine their own philosophies and practices in order to assess whether these may lead to culture conflict or an imposition of our own vaue systems and standards as being "the best." The central thrust of this particular session was that there are many ways to be right and that in working with ESL children and their families, teachers need to safeguard against using rigid and dogmatic approaches.

THEME VII: PROGRAM PLANNING - LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Goal: To develop and extend language learning experiences in the preschool setting.

Outline: In order to offer appropriate language stimulation for ESL preschoolers, it is important to consider the type and context of verbal interaction which the teacher initiates.

During this session, the work of Joan Tough served as a focal point for discussing language learning experiences. Participants were made aware of the importance of stressing fluency rather than accuracy in young children's language and were offered many practical suggestions for encouraging expressive language in children and building their confidence and abilities in this area. The notion of using consistent and repetitive core phrases was highlighted and through small group exercises, the common routines of the preschool day were examined in terms of their key concepts, language uses and core phrasing possibilities. Viewing of selected video tapes provided an opportunity for assessing and critically discussing the various strategies which teachers did or did not use in fostering language development. Participants were also introduced to the concept of BIG BOOKS as an exciting tool for promoting language learning.

At the conclusion of this session, class members had gained the necessary knowledge and skills to observe and assess children's language and to plan systematically how to extend and expand their language use.

THEME VIII: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Goal: To broaden the participants' perspective of preschool as an integral part of the education process and to acquaint them with current trends and directions in the ECE/ESL field.

Outline: In an effort to conclude this course on a "moving forward" note, it was important to offer participants concrete avenues for expressing an ongoing professional commitment to effecting positive change in the ECE/ESL field.

Class members were introduced to a very current research project which had been carried out in several preschool programs specifically designed to meet the

needs of ESL children. Research findings supported the fact that a preschool experience does play an important transitional role in "bridging" the heritage and host cultures, particularly where attention is paid to some of the differences in teaching/learning styles between and amongst cultures. Data regarding the relationship between cognition, language and preschool materials were also presented and particular emphasis was given to the issue of self-concept as it relates to immigrant children. Preschool experiences which assist ESL learners to develop a separate self-identity and to make friends were viewed by the researchers as a positive step in counteracting the low-status and poor self-esteem which is so often a part of the immigrant family's condition.

The afternoon presentation focussed on the vital and instrumental role that Early Childhood educators play in our educational process and the need for society to value their contribution through the provision of quality training and high salary. ECE practitioners were encouraged to become personally and professionally involved in action-oriented endeavours directed towards improving the status of their profession in the eyes of politicians and the public. Twenty axioms for effecting change on education policies and procedures were introduced with specific reference to the ECE/ESL field.

In summary, this final session was extremely successful in motivating participants to continue in their professional development and to join hands with others who share common goals. The tone of the afternoon was both inspiring and energizing.

Assignments

In order to obtain Langara *Advanced Study in ECE* course credit, students were required to submit one major project. As noted on the following page, this assignment related to one of several central themes addressed during the eight sessions. Class members agreed to contribute a duplicate copy of their assignment to the Preschool ESL Resource Development Project. This Project represents a joint undertaking by the PRESL Committee and the R.E.A.C.H. Language Stimulation Program through a grant from the Vancouver Foundation. It is the purpose of this Project to develop, organize and seek permanent "housing" for theoretical and practical resources which will support and enhance the effort of ECE personnel in their work with ESL preschoolers and their families.

Given the comprehensive nature of the course, the expertise shared by numerous resource persons, and the high degree of interest and motivation expressed by class participants, many excellent assignments were received.

SUMMARY

From the point of view of the course planning committee, this offering was extremely successful, for the following reasons:

1. A maximum number of 26 participants registered for this course prior to its starting date and a waiting list was created. This full enrollment reconfirmed the interest in and need for this area of study.

2. Offering a multi-faceted course for the equivalent of one full semester (48 hours) permitted an indepth study of the many issues related to working with ESL preschoolers. As each issue or theme was explored, participants recognized the comprehensive nature of this area of study and the need for a detailed examination of all its aspects and implications. Furthermore, the full semester time frame with attendance and assignment requirements provided a valid rationale for having this course recognized as a Level II competency component by the Provincial Child Care Licensing Board.

3. The involvement of a great many resource people helped to ensure that the content was developed and presented by those who possessed expertise related to the various themes. This model also provided an opportunity for participants to become personally acquainted with individuals who were committed to this field in some professional/personal capacity and to recognize the value of a multi-disciplinary approach.

Both oral and written feedback by the participants reflected the positive nature of their experience. On a rating scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), all participants evaluated the course as 8 or above. Written comments included the following:

"This course far exceeded my expectations."

"The course covered many aspects of ESL that I hadn't even thought about."

"I am amazed at my increased sensitivity and awareness."

"Better than any course I have taken."

"I'm truly sorry that this class is over."

It is hoped that this report will help early childhood educators design similar courses to meet the needs of teachers in their communities who are serving growing numbers of non-English speaking children and their families.

REFERENCE

Tough, Joan. 1977. *Talking and learning.* London: Schools Council Publications.

PRESL would like to acknowledge publicly the support and encouragement of Langara's ECE Continuing Education Department in developing and implementing the course described.